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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN: DEMARCHE DELIVERED ON IRFR

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11. (U) SUMMARY: Poloff delivered the Department of State's International Religious Freedom Report (IRFR) to the Afghanistan Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs Director of External Relations and Director of Publications Mr. Qazi Habib Rahman Salehi. Salehi agreed in theory that religious tolerance was an admirable goal for his country, but argued that the mostly poorly-educated population could hardly be expected to hold such a broad-minded view. He raised issues of Shari'a law, corruption, and international influence in his country. End Summary.

12. (U) Afghanistan Ministry of Hajj and Islamic Affairs Director of External Relations and Director of Publications Salehi met with Poloff October 27. In his role as Director of Publications, Salehi publishes a monthly magazine entitled "Payam-e-Haq," or "The Voice of Righteousness." When he receives the Dari-translated version of the IRFR, he said he will publish it in his magazine in order to broaden ideas and inform readers about international perspectives. He believes such documents provide useful leverage to promote new ideas and prepare his country for participation in the community of nations.

13. (SBU) Despite his opening remarks in which he emphasized his own open-mindedness and high levels of education (he speaks fluent Arabic, and was a professor in nine countries, including Egypt, Indonesia, Libya, Malaysia, Malta, United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam), Salehi voiced fairly conservative views--views that are highly consistent with Afghan standards--and that bespeak the difficulties the U.S. will have in influencing Afghan views on religion.

14. (SBU) Salehi argued that there are two key problems to expanding ideas of religious tolerance in Afghanistan. The first is an underdeveloped culture: he said 80 percent of the population is ill-educated, but the real problem is that Pashtuns are ill-educated and monolingual. Special television shows are needed to reach this population; no good shows exist. The second problem is the environment created by Afghanistan's neighbors. He said Iran uses radio to preach routinely against Christianity, and Pakistan's ISI also propagandizes, creating doubts in peoples' minds, taking advantage of their ignorance. Anyway, he said complaints by the Sikhs and Hindus are not true; that all groups are permitted to practice whatever beliefs they wish. (NOTE: The IRFR notes numerous complaints by these and other religious minorities. END NOTE.)

15. (SBU) Salehi was especially passionate on the subject of punishment: he said that more punitive measures are needed, and that the U.S. should support Shari'a law, which is well-suited to an aggressive culture like Afghanistan. He said that people here don't respond to soft measures, but respond well to methods such as cutting off the hand of a thief: only 50 hands might need to be chopped off in order for crime to drop. In his view, the current system, based on our justice system, offers ineffective deterrents to crime.

¶6. (SBU) Salehi then raised the issue of Afghans who are employed with international organizations: He believes most are losing their cultural values by exposure to western norms, have abandoned praying, and have taken up alcohol consumption. The exception, he believes, are local employees of the U.S. Embassy. He noted that the Embassy recently fired eight employees suspected of corruption; this action improved people's opinion of the U.S. government.

¶7. (SBU) Poloff asked his view of the Zalmai and Mushtaq case. (NOTE: Ahmed Ghous Zalmai and Mullah Qari Mushtaq were sentenced to 20 years in prison for publishing a Dari translation of the Koran that allegedly contained errors and lacked an accompanying Arabic translation for comparison. The Supreme Court recently upheld the appeals court verdict. END NOTE.) Salehi feels that these men are of such poor character that it is a mistake to defend them, and cannot understand how the U.S. could support anyone who insults Islam and potentially brings harm to 40 million people. Further, he said it is his private view that even asking about this case constitutes interference with his government.

¶8. (U) Comment: Despite the negative tone of much of the discussion, we parted on positive terms, and he welcomed additional meetings with the Americans. Poloff plans to follow-up with Salehi and will advise on reaction to the report. End Comment.
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